



Be the boss, not a friend

January 18, 2011: 10:55 AM ET

As a manager, all your relationships should be bounded and defined. They're not about liking, chemistry, or personality. Relationships that are personal can only produce disappointment in the long run.

By Linda A. Hill and Kent Lineback

Why is it that so many managers fail to live up to their full potential? After making it to management, many end up losing steam along the way, drowning in endless meetings and emails while trying to manage up, down and influence their peers. Feeling discouraged, most grow complacent. The following excerpt from Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader by Linda A. Hill and Kent Lineback addresses the all too common problem when managers become friends with their direct reports.

Do you consider your direct reports your friends? Perhaps you're driven by a deep need to be liked. Your first instinct in any interaction is to build close, personal relationships, and you will do almost anything to protect them. One new manager said he had to "fight the burning desire to be accommodating . . . so that [my people] would like me." To confuse being liked with being trusted or respected is a classic trap for all managers.

Perhaps you hate conflict. You avoid doing or saying anything that might cause tension or upset others. When strife of any kind arises, you leap to remove it or tamp it down. As another manager discovered about himself: "I don't react well in conflict situations. I back off. It really hurts me to have people get mad at me." Perhaps you're simply uncomfortable with the idea of disrupting others' lives. This aspect of being a boss unsettles many managers.

As one explained, "What really makes it tough is that you get to know the person fairly well and you know he has a wife and two children and owns a home and has debt like the rest of us. You're saying, 'Look, you aren't cutting it.' And you're assaulting their self-image and threatening their whole lifestyle."

Perhaps you've made a rational choice: you think close personal relationships are the best way to influence people. When you ask people to do something, you're saying, in effect, "Do it for me because we're friends." What could be more compelling?

If you create or allow close personal ties with your subordinates for any of these reasons, you will struggle as a manager. You won't be able to make tough but necessary people decisions or evaluate people accurately and give critical but helpful feedback. If you try to stay on good terms with everyone, you'll make exceptions for individuals that others consider undeserved or unfair. Relationships that are primarily personal can only produce disappointment for your people in the long run and make you much less effective.

Do you tend to create such relationships? Think of your people one by one and ask, "If his performance slipped and didn't improve, would I be able to terminate him? If she made repeated serious mistakes in spite of careful coaching, could I cut back her responsibilities or tell her she won't get a raise?"

If you're reluctant to discipline or terminate someone because of the harm it might do to your relationship, then your ties to that person will prevent you from doing your job as the boss.

Consider the differences between being a boss and being a friend.

Friendship exists for itself

Friendship is not a means to some other end. As social beings, we need close, supportive connections with others. That's not, however, what drives the boss-subordinate relationship. That tie exists to accomplish work. If something prevents a direct report from doing his or her job, then the relationship must end.

Friends are equals

Bosses and direct reports are not equals inside the organization. Even if the boss keeps her stick of authority hidden most of the time, she will still need to use it on occasion in ways that may not please her subordinates. Not many friendships can survive such status inequality when that happens.



PHOTO: CHRIS HASTON/NEO

Friends accept each other as they are

Friends don't actively evaluate and try to change each other. They certainly don't make their friendship contingent on such change. Yet an effective manager must constantly assess his people's performance and abilities and press them to develop and change. Such benevolent but real pressure is an important, unavoidable part of managing.

Friends don't check up on each other all the time

Managers continually press their people to report on progress, evaluate themselves, and commit to future results. Friends do have expectations of each other, but they're mutual, not one sided, and less demanding.

As a practical matter, you cannot be friends with all your people equally

If you choose to make friends of your people, human chemistry will come into play, and you'll develop closer ties with some than others. You can imagine the havoc that will wreak with your efforts to manage a smooth-working team, especially a virtual team with far-flung members.

If you create friendships with your people, if you try to motivate them through the personal ties you've created or allowed, you're likely to find yourself having to choose between maintaining the ties or obtaining the best results possible. If you maintain the ties, you will compromise results or make unethical choices that harm others not for a greater good but for the good of a friend. If you choose work and the work group over the wishes of a friend, as eventually and inevitably you must, the friend will feel betrayed.

Sooner or later you must decide against, disappoint, criticize, discipline, demote, or even fire someone who works for you. To someone who thought you were friends, those actions will feel like a personal betrayal and will damage or destroy that person's commitment to the work.

Another paradox: Caring, even close, but focused on the work

Your relationship with your people should be driven by neither control nor friendship, defined by neither affection nor authority, though affection and authority should certainly be pieces of the puzzle.

In a word, the boss-subordinate relationship is another paradox, one of the most profound you will encounter as a boss. It's a paradox because it must be genuinely human and caring—even close, since you and your people strive toward a common, worthwhile purpose. But it must remain a relationship that never loses sight of one fact: it exists to accomplish work. It is a means to an end. You and your people need to connect as humans but always, in the end, to focus on the work. You and they need to be friendly—no one will work hard for a cold, distant, uncaring jerk—but ultimately not friends in the true sense of the word.

We've heard some say, "Then it's just manipulative. You only care in order to get work from people. You use them. You don't truly, genuinely care about them." We understand how someone might reach that conclusion. We're sure many managers feign concern only to get what they want.

Still, we maintain, it is possible to care deeply while focusing on the work. Consider other relationships. Do you expect or want your lawyer, doctor, accountant, or therapist to be your close friend? You want them to care deeply and genuinely for you. But you want their insights and expertise, and you don't want those clouded by affection for you. Think of a great teacher you had. You wanted her on your side, caring for you, but you understood that if you didn't know the exam answers, she would grade you accordingly. Think of a coach. Again, you wanted him to care for you and help you develop, but you both accepted that his ultimate goal was to field the best team. Whether you made the team, whether you played or sat on the bench, depended not on his feelings for you but on your performance.

Management is no different. It works best as a cordial, genuinely caring relationship, but it's not about the relationship. It should be an open, positive relationship, but one in which there is ultimately some distance, a line never crossed. If you create relationships in which the primary goal is to sustain the relationship rather than do work, you will be creating a trap that sooner or later will snare you.

Why it's hard to get the relationship right and keep it right

Given its paradoxical nature, the boss-subordinate relationship is easy to get wrong. Instinct, gut feel, and natural chemistry are poor guides. They'll push you away from people you instinctively don't like and pull you toward those to whom you feel naturally attracted.

Yet, it falls on you, as a boss, to work with and create the right relationships with both. All your relationships should be bounded and defined. They're not about liking, chemistry, or personality. While those factors don't disappear, and you will have to deal with them, they do not and should not define your fundamental relationship with your people.

Linda A. Hill is a professor of business administration at Harvard Business School. Kent Lineback spent many years as a manager and an executive in business and government. Reprinted by permission of Harvard Business Review Press.

You Might Also Like

by Taboola



What the Bible Says About Money (Shocking)
Moneynews



The One Word Missing From All Those ObamaCare Ads
Investors.com



Is There a Finance Talent Shortage?
CFO Magazine



3 Typical Pieces of Financial Advice Debunked
Recessionista

Recommended for You

- Is Obamacare cheap or pricey? The verdicts are in**
- What's an MBA for, anyway?**
- Former Amazon star exec killed in bike accident**
- Biggest winners of the government shutdown**

Around the Web

- Workforce Optimization: 10 Easy Essentials**
NimbleSchedule
- What is "Office Freedom"?**
Best Matters
- Never ignore your customers: Q&A with author and CEO Phil Terry**
Bazaarvoice

[what's this]